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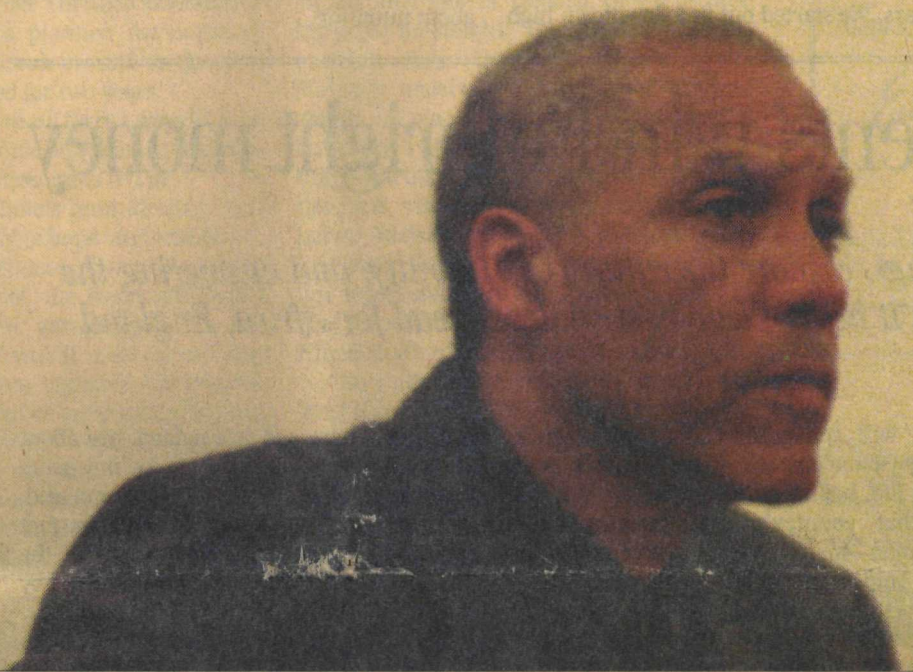


Photo by Eric Foglen

Commissioned to sculpt a monument of Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable for the downtown park that bears his name, artist Martin Puryear visited Chicago this week to discuss and defend his concept.

Set in stone

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON

Staff Writer

Martin Puryear has big hands. Really big hands, with long fingers, limber knuckles, and wide, flat nails. And he ought to. For the better part of four decades, the Washington, D.C., native has been a sculptor—and one of the country's best—with large creations as far flung as Governors State University, New York City, Los Angeles, Sweden, and Nebraska.

Fourteen years ago, Puryear was handed what he calls the challenge of his life: \$500,000 and the task of sculpting a monument for the centerpiece of a downtown park dedicated to Chicago's little-

sung founder, Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable. And even as that park—DuSable Park, at 401 N. Lake Shore Drive—remains undeveloped and mired in a seemingly endless process of environmental cleanup, Puryear has trudged ahead. He's conceived and built a prototype for his statue that among du Sable devotees has provoked both censure and praise. Tuesday night, Puryear stood up before an audience of roughly 75 at the Art Institute's Fullerton Hall to describe and explain—and defend—his idea. His design, meanwhile, is only a rough draft, he said, and getting rougher all the time.

"This project has put me through more changes than I ever would have imagined," Puryear told the gathering. "The proposal I pre-

sented to the city at this point is nothing but a first draft."

That first draft calls for a simple 13-foot granite slab with a curved back and a flat front, from which a frieze of a figure in profile with an axe slung over his shoulder emerges. Around the monument, a circular plaza with two long, rounded benches. And on the statue's curved back, a few sentences trumpeting du Sable's life and accomplishments.

The project's complications, Puryear said, were manifold. First, no one knows just what du Sable looked like, beyond a two-century-old description by a British officer of a "handsome Negro." (A settler from Haiti, du Sable was also

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Meet me at the crossroads

IN THE JOURNAL

West Loop expansion

DuSable sculptor says local piece h

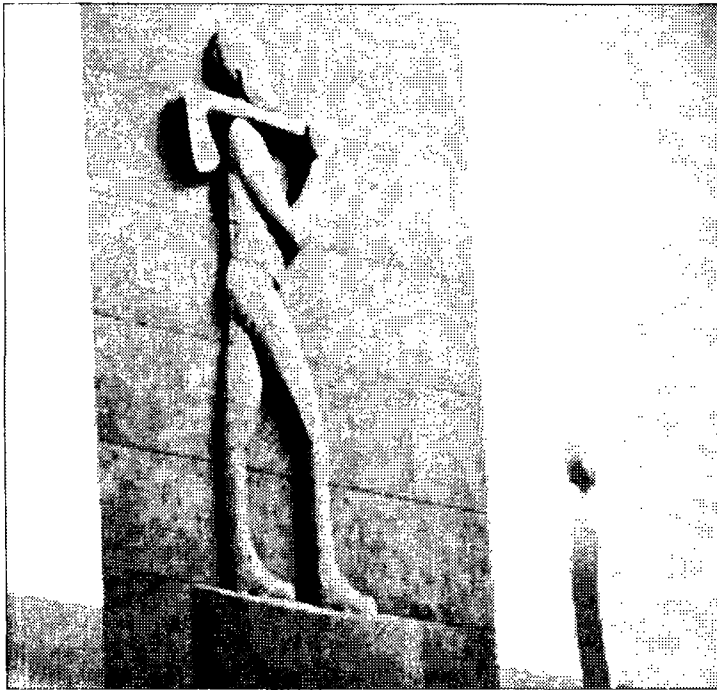


Photo by Eric Fogleman

Puryear's rough draft: a prototype for a 13-foot monument-in-relief dedicated to du Sable and centered in DuSable Park.

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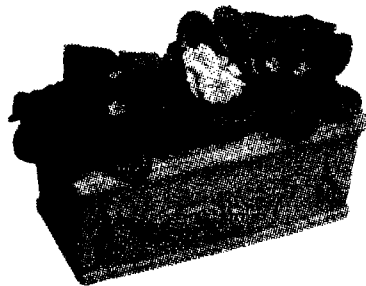
certainly one of the country's first polyglots. He's roundly believed to have had an African mother and a French father; his wife was Potawatomi.) Second, Puryear, who began his artistic dabbling as a realist painter, has, over the years, turned increasingly to abstraction as a sculptor.

"What pulled me out of that was the clear sense that du Sable's racial identity shouldn't be a secret, that it shouldn't be available only in words," Puryear said. "In this case, the image is worth 1,000 words. But not only should the image be recognizable as Negro, black, Afro-American, whatever, but we also don't know what he looks like. It's a very fine line."

In his prototype, Puryear chose to stay just this side of that fine line. While the statue clearly connotes du Sable's eth-

nicity, it does not offer a portrait of any particular man. Critics have charged Puryear's rendering is too symbolic, too abstract. Indeed, at a similar confab the night before at the South Side's DuSable Museum, Puryear said he'd fended off accusations of "distortion" and "abstraction," and a little tension—but only a little—strained Tuesday night's air. (There was at least one "tsk" in the darkened room when Puryear clicked to the slide showing his miniature model.) And while Puryear assured the gathering that the prototype is somewhat up for grabs, he's sticking to his conceptual guns.

"The more I work on this, the more I realize it's a beginning," Puryear said. "I realize I want the work to be more my own, have my own stamp on it. It's very realistic to me, even though to some it's not realistic



Their garden.



his most difficult

enough. For me, the honest way to deal with the fact that we don't know what du Sable looks like is abstraction. I'm not concerned even that it remain in relief... Normally, I'm given a project and the people who commission me know what my work is like. This is something I haven't had to deal with before. I want the statue to convey dignity, and also a sense of timelessness, so that in 50, 100 years it's not going to look ridiculously dated. There's got to be something credible to it."

In fact, Puryear said, left to his own, he might create something even taller and less figurative than what he's proposed. It would, he said, resist any "delusion."

"I might go more and more abstract, so it's less likely people will look at it and think that's what du Sable looks like,"

Puryear said. "It's not a portrait of a person because we don't know what he looks like. It has to show racial identity because that's very important in our society—and in this case, crucial."

Hoping to persuade Tuesday's audience, Puryear showed a series of similarly abstract ancient African sculptures Puryear said he'd used for inspiration—as, indeed, have many Western artists, he said—ritualistic or emblematic statues with African facial features belonging to no one in particular.

"When I look at these, I don't look for a clue as to what this person looks like," Puryear said. "What I look at is that they're so powerful, that there's so much dignity in these faces."

A Chicagoan for a dozen years—and, until 1990, an art teacher at the University of Illinois at Chicago—Puryear said he'd been astonished throughout his lakeshore tenure at du Sable's invisibility in the city he founded.

"What's made me stick with it is the belief that this is a really important project," Puryear said. "I'm speaking really personally."

■
And it's a project of some urgency. Should Park District officials fail to design and develop DuSable Park in the next six

years—the greenspace has been dedicated since 1987—the land could go to a developer. At the same time, Environmental Protection Agency officials are working to investigate and, if need be, scrub clean radioactive thorium found on the site two years ago. Not 12 hours before Puryear took the podium, a team of contractors in yellow boots and safety suits stomped out onto DuSable Park—these days more of a wilderness than anything else—to take a few soil samples. The effort marked the first concrete step toward cleaning up the park in well over a year.

Puryear noted that beyond DuSable Park's environmental problems, it's difficult to get to, accessible now only from Lake Shore Drive's lowest and dreariest level. Jumping to her feet and shouting to be heard, Joan Pilot, a 20-year member of the DuSable League, a group seeking to honor the city's founder, posited Millennium Park as an alternative site for Puryear's monument.

"Why not put your statue in Millennium Park?" Pilot said, to uproarious applause. "It's good enough for a skating rink and an amphitheater and lots of other monuments. The sun would hit the statue at the right time and in the right place, instead of it being under a bridge and over a hump of dirt. Something's not right."

"Thank you for that," Puryear said.

By way of offering a little encouragement, Gerald Nordland, an independent art curator, reminded Puryear of Auguste Rodin's seemingly failed endeavor to sculpt a likeness of Balzac. After 13 years and many rejected iterations, Paris took its money back. Today, Balzac sculptures are masterpieces.

"I'm hoping you will have patience with us and that our society will tolerate your evolution," Nordland said. "And that this will grow into something you're proud of."

"I'm known as a perfectionist," Puryear said. "I won't quit until I get it right. And I'm patient, and I'm stubborn. I'm not a stranger to that kind of bureaucracy."

Fun with CAPS

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to donate clothes for assault victims, check out the quality of their baby's car seat, and promote bicycle safety.

dict was what we thought it would be—and was. And like the time my neighborhood beat cop came by the house just as I discovered a dead, half-eaten rat on the front porch and was in dire

du

a 13-foot
Sable Park